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ABSTRACT

The amount of violence and inappropriate information that children receive through television and other media is a matter of concern. This paper reviews the values of fantasy play and compares those values with the effects of television viewing on New Zealand children. Both obvious and subtle messages that children receive from television are discussed, with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles used to illustrate the effect that television can have on young viewers. Issues such as male and female roles, cultural diversity, and aggression are considered, as is the effect of child-oriented marketing of products. It is suggested that television can be used positively at home, in the classroom, and in society. Twenty-two "Hints for Living Happily with Television" are appended. Also appended are descriptions of two activities that parents can use to help their children develop critical and discriminating television viewing habits. Contains 13 references. (LB)

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LIVING HAPPILY WITH TELEVISION

Linda McGilvary and Pat Penrose.

"When I was a child I played with guns and they never did me any harm."

We used to play bows and arrows especially after going to the Saturday pictures. It's a wonder we didn't hurt each other."

"In my day we threw cones or acorns at the other kids, playing war games. We all did it."

If playing violent fantasy games is a normal part of growing up as it seems, why do we need to worry now?

From what we know about child development learning about fantasy, pretending, role playing, dramatic play or whatever you choose to call it IS a normal part of growing up. It is about developing the imagination. Children who learn to tell the difference between fantasy and reality in these early years are healthy.

There is a difference however, between the way we used to get our ideas and act them out and the way it happens now. The amount of violence and inappropriate information that comes at children through television and other media is of concern. Giving a child a toy weapon is condoning the war-type play that the toy offers.

In order to develop the imagination and learn about the reality/fantasy concept children go through a series of stages.

Fantasy Play Stages * (from "Take Another Look" Pat Penrose 1991)

"1 Young children may imitate the actions of adults close to them, for example, copy a parent using a vacuum cleaner. The play is likely to happen when the child sees a vacuum cleaner and wants to use it.

2 Functional Play The child handles equipment. May dress up but quickly removes garments. Will be surprised if she/he sees herself/him in the morror. Watches other people. Often moves into the play area after the bigger children have left and handles the clothes that they have used.

3 Constructive Play Children play for longer periods and NEED the props in order to play the game. Later, children will improvise or make their own props. They verbalize " I am Batman."

4 Dramatic Play A child can now take on a role and be another person or thing. She/he can imagine props by saying so: "This is a boat and I am a pirate." The play lasts longer, and can involve two or more people with verbal interaction.

5 Games with Rules These are usually played by school children and are related to moral development - the rules can be changed if they do not suit! (Have you ever played a board game with an 8 year old?) They will develop secret clubs, codes, initiations etc.

These stages, like other stages in development proceed in order and cannot be hurried along though an interested adult can do a great deal to enhance the learning. Stages in the development of fantasy closely parallel those of social development in young children. For example, a child not yet able to play in a group (social) will not be able to take part in dramatic play (stage 4) which depend on the child being able to play in small groups."

VALUES OF FANTASY PLAY

Other values of this type of play are the enjoyment of making friends through playing in a group situation, developing the social skills of sharing and co-operating with other children. It is a natural way for language to develop, especially where roles are being used. There is a

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chance to practise roles particularly to understand those of people they are familiar with. Shy children are able to communicate in a safe way and attitudes are shaped and clarified through interaction with others. Pretending allows experiences to be re-enacted to gain a sense of power and to understand what has happened to them.

Initially children think (unconsciously) that everything is real. From some research (Penrose 1977 and 1978) it was shown that children relate to the world according to whether "people" relate to their own body - so when asked if Batman was "real" the children would say "yes" or "no" for the same reason, "he walks like me", "real skin", "the head is real (because he talks or it moves) rest pretend", "people just hiding" or "coz he flies"(moves).

This understanding explains why some children know that the Ninja Turtles, for example, are not real but at the same time are frightened of Father Christmas, clowns or other real people acting. The child understands that the person is not what it seems but cannot relate the person to their own self and the knowledge they have about themselves.

It was interesting in the 1970's to find that programmes children actually played out in the playground were Batman, Kung-Fu, Spiderman and Wonder Woman - all programmes that could be called "fantasy". More latterly the list of programmes children act out include "high drama" e.g. Dukes of Hazard or science fiction type/fantasy ones. It is the fantasy nature of programmes that children in early childhood are attracted to copy rather than the violent component.

This is because children are trying to make sense of their world, to find out the difference between fantasy and reality. We know children do this by trying it out. Once the mystery is solved in play, the play changes just as it always has.

A problem for early childhood teachers is that frequently the kind of play that comes from television is disruptive, aimless and rough. Some teachers try to ban it but children act out what they do not understand and adults have to find ways of helping the play more positively.

A reason the play is aimless, disruptive and rough is because the child only picks up the character from the story on television. Remember the child judges the character according to his/her own body and so only gets the significant events e.g. Ninja Turtles fly, Dukes of Hazard have fast cars etc. The story line goes too fast. There is no time to pause and discuss what is happening with an interested adult.

Consider the difference with a story from a book. Children return to the book many times until the child knows the characters and the story-line really well. Once these are understood then the child can change them.

Some difficulties children have are with real people doing unusual things e.g. Batman, The Man from Atlantis. The costume can give an older child clues about who the character is but can endanger children who may test out an idea believing they can do it. It is wise to make such situations as safe as possible however, to avoid accidents. Children in high rise buildings overseas have been known to be killed trying to fly because they have a distorted perception of height.

Children in this age range are in the process of learning to distinguish reality/fantasy. It begins before the child is one year old and children learn that when mother leaves she will come back (object permanence). By about 7 years the reality/fantasy concept is established.

<u>REALITY</u>

* Last year television violence reached an all time high on local television. The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand's annual survey revealed that in 1990 the total number of violent incidents incresed 3-fold from the previous year. TV3 topped the poll with a rating of 10.2 incidents an hour. (Tube Views Feb. 1991, Page 12)

* It is estimated that the average American child will see 32,000 murders, 40,000 attempted murders and 250,000 total acts of violence on television before reaching the age of 18 years. (NZ Listener and TV Times Sept. 24 1990, page 54)

* Playmate Holdings Ltd (Hong Kong) - the sole licensees for Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles announced a 1990 net profit of $262.8 million (NZ) (Play for Life, NZ Newsletter, July 1991, page 15)

* Included in the 1990 USA Top Ten best sellers were Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Barbie, WWF Wrestling Figures, Batman and GI Joe. (Play for Life Newsletter, July 1991, Page 15)

* Most New Zealand children watch 20-24 hours of television per week - that is 2 years of fulltime watching by the age of 16 years. (NZ Listener, Nov. 26 1988).

So what does this mean on an individual level? What are our children learning from television advertising and programmes? Children are not passive observers of the world around them. They are active participants - watching, assimilating and trying things out as they learn life skills. Television, with its wealth of information about other people, different lifestyles, fantasy and fact provides a window on the world right in our homes. Many of the images may sit comfortably with our family lifestyle and attitudes but others will grate against our value system.

Some messages children gain from television are stated, others are more subtle. Through their viewing young children are shown how to interact with others, how to resolve differences and ways of behaving socially. Unfortunately many television programmes and videos aimed at the children's market, including cartoon and drama series, provide children with a strong message that arguments should be solved by fighting, exerting physical power is a "good" way of overcoming problems with others and that name calling and threatening are practical skills for getting what you want. Frequently weapons are portrayed as an effective way of dealing with problems and characters who have different views to the "hero" are bombed, stabbed or shot so that "right" can prevail. Someone always wins and someone always loses.

Often programmes originally designed for adults are shown as children's programmes e.g. Dr Who.

What do children learn about the roles of males and females from television? There is much data to show that while male characters have adventures, rescue people and engage in physical action the female roles are passive, centered around the home, seen to be beautiful but simple and support the male in her life. Toys marketed during the commercial breaks reinforce these models - with action-type toys presented for boys while girls are encouraged to be nurturers and homemakers.

Television has an important role in introducing children to the consumer society. Commercials present glossy views of the latest toy, crisps, sugared snacks and drinks to children who do not have the skills to descriminate. Since adults also buy from advertising it is apparent that the methods are successful. A recent analysis of television commercials aimed at children noted that the graphics, photography and audio levels were superior to the programmes they surrounded and that there was continual repetition, (Notar, E. "Children and TV Commercials" "Childhood Education Winter 1989, pages 66-67) presumably so that watchers would catch the message to buy or want the product.

After pressure from their child who has seen the advertisement some parents will purchase the product in the belief that giving their child what all the other children want is an expression of their love for that child. Some fad toys amongst a variety of other types of toys may be appropriate especially if a child saves and buys that toy his/herself. It is the children who do not have access to books, creative toys, outings and adult interaction and who watch a lot of television we need to worry about.

The cartoon Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles currently playing on TV3 typifies the 1990's fast-moving slick style of programme for children. Although originally produced for the "young teen" market its audience includes under 5's - a result of several factors such as scheduling, advertising of the programme and a strong campaign to sell spin-off products.

In Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles the turtle "heros" use violence to achieve their goals, imply that might is right if you are a "goodie", trivialise the real effects of physical violence by springing up unhurt to do battle another day and portray a glamour image which appeals to young children. April, their reporter friend and helpmate, despite being a modern career

woman, is constantly being cast in situations where she needs rescuing by the male turtles - thereby reinforcing traditional sex-role stereotyping. During each episode TMNT characters consume great quantities of pizza - an effective way of advertising the company which sponsors the programme. The commercialism that TMNTs have achieved worldwide has run into millions of dollars with everything from wallpaper to turtleos (green cheerios), soft toys to sticking plaster and bread. An amazing achievement! An analysis of the programme showed that an average hour of TMNTs includes 34 acts of violence - that is 85 per week for those who watch every day. (ChCh Star, 11/7/1990, page 2) The attitudes to life this programme contributes do nothing to foster a society where women and men are equal, where conflict is solved in a peaceful way and where wealth is shared. And TMNT is only one programme ----

How does television portray NZ's cultural reality? A visitor from overseas might be forgiven for thinking that the typical family here is white and middle class. Where are the tangata whenua, the Samoan, Niuain, Tongean and Asian people of this land? Rarely do they appear in programmes or commercials - a fact indicative of who holds the power in Aotearoa. Children are not immune to this message.

The high cost of producing quality local television tends to mean that young people are subjected to a continual stream of cheap overseas material. Children's television at present includes many American cartoons and advertisements, displaying attitudes, values and trends which reflect that culture.

Although children may not be able to articulate their knowledge gleaned from television we find out what they have learned by looking at their behaviour. Young children are great imitators and imitate that which puzzles them. Research supports the observations of parents and professionals working with children that youngsters who see violence not only imitate it but show aggression in other ways e.g. using weapons to hurt other children, using Kung Fu kicks. A longitudinal study carried out at the University of illinois found that subjects who watched large amounts of television at age 8 were more likely than other subjects in the study to have been arrested and prosecuted for criminal acts by the age of 30 years. ("What do children learn - what do parents do?" V.I.P. Murray and B. Lonnburg. TV Foundaton Info Sheet). Despite a wealth of evidence that indicates a relationship between television violence-watching and aggressive behaviour opponents argue that research has not yet proven this link: however there are no studies available which show that watching a diet of violence, racist, sexist, consumerism has positiveoutcomes for children's learning! There is ample evidence that viewed violence will affect children who have a predisposition and those who view a regular diet will imitate it. Research (Penrose, 1979) shows that there is a correlation between the amount of television the family watches and that of the child.

Small children are normally active doers - constantly moving, interacting and exploring. When watching television they do not use and practise many of the motor skills they need to develop in these early years. While it has been observed that small children will play in front of television, most children spend long hours sitting still with eyes fixed at the screen. Vision and hearing may be stimulated by television viewing, movement and sensory development are not.

This is not to say that television is all bad - just that things have changed over the years as television is on longer, has more channels and techniques are more sophisticated.

Despite this rather grim scenario there are many ways we can use television positively at home, in the classroom and in society. Children learn from the real life adult models around them. Changing our own viewing habits may be a first step to changing those of our children. Watching selectively and critically are skills which children can be taught in the same way that parents teach children to clean their teeth and go to bed at certain times. As children become more media literate, analysing a programme, noting how special effects are created and discussing the underlying messages, their intellect is challenged and developed. Talking about favourite television programmes with children encourages them to think about what they have seen. Allowing opportunities for them to experience power over their environment in a creative non-competitive way removes the need for violent weapons in play.

How can we reach those parents who through ignorance do not realise the effect that too much television is having on their child? Television could help by providing programmes aimed at teaching the parents (like "You and Your Child" which was immensely popular). A

message to parents tagged on the end of young children's programmes to guide discussion could be useful. However, to say that parents are solely responsible is not enough - parents if you talk to them - trust television to provide programmes which are suitable for children. This may seem naive but that is the reality we hear working in early childhood.

We, as people working towards the prevention of violence need to be aware of the issues surrounding television and promote a healthy balanced style of living where television is just one part of life.

No reira tena koutou katou.

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HINTS FOR LIVING HAPPILY WITH TELEVISION

1 Is your television dominating the living area in your house?Try putting it in an obscure place in the house.

2 Allow your children a certain number of hours each week for television. Encourage them to make the best use of their "telly" time by suggesting that they plan their viewing for the week with the help of the weekly viewing guide.

3 Express your views on children's programmes (in writing) to local stations. But don't forget to praise as well as criticize.

4 Television watching is a tidy occupation, while kid's play is untidy. Do you care if part of your house is a mess for a while? Forget the housework sometimes and join in with the kids. They may be so appreciative that they will be very helpful for a time!

5 Show (by example) that hobbies can be fun. Encourage the borrowing of books on skills and crafts from the library.

6 Arrange family outings. Have a Sunday barbecue in the bush. After the sausages, throw a ball, play cricket, go for a jog or a long walk. Make the kids so tired that they won't even think to turn the telly on at home!

7 Find time to watch television with your children and discuss it together afterwards. Do the goodies always win in real life? Why did the shoot-out seem like a game? How could the hero be so strong and healthy on his diet of fast foods? Did the monster scare you? Can you think of a better ending? Questions, of course will depend on the age of the child.

8 Support the teaching of mass media education in schools (not just television but newspaper and radio as well).

9 Draw up your own family critique chart and let viewers fill in the necessary spaces. Their comments should be interesting!

10 If possible, take the children to live entertainment so that they can learn to appreciate the real thing.

11 Occasionally make fun of some of the television values that you don't like - for example, that reflex reaching for the disprin when headaches start!

12 Suggest to television stations that they provide access for public comment on their show.

13 Join Play for Life or Children's Television Foundation.

14 Turn off the television when the chosen programme is over. Bring out the books and games.

15 Don't be a television knocker all the time - remember current affairs, shows, sporting coverages, wild life series, programmes on other countries are all educational.

16 Discuss the procedures that your family will follow when visitors arrive. Should the television be switched off?

17 Read stories aloud to your children. Try making up some together too.

18 Boycott the fad toys advertised on TV. Instead provide toys and materials which challenge the imagination and encourage creative and constructive play.

19 A poor choice of programme by one of your older children - discuss why you don't like it. Then it's up to you - either you let the child watch it alone, or you switch off the television set.

20 Pressure politicians to legislate for the abolition or reduction of advertising during children's viewing time.

21 Can we convince big business that we would like (and buy) their products more if they spent less on elaborate advertisements and used the money saved on funding quality children's programmes? What effect would the following statement have on you? "We are economising on this advertisement because we are funding the children's programme which follows."

22 Utilize your video to record pre-selected programmes to use later.

(Excerpts from an article by Brother Kelvin Canavan on CHILDREN'S TELEVISION - MAKING BETTER USE OF TELEVISION.)

Much will depend on the age of the child and the home situation.

With young children parents need to exercise some control over what is actually watched on television. In selecting programmes for, or preferably with, their children, parents are advised to consider such factors as:

* the developmental level of the child
* the appropriateness of the material
* the child's likely response to the programme. Will it result in nightmares, produce anxiety or fear, or induce belief that physical violence is a perfectly acceptable form of self expression.

Here we need to remember that a very young child cannot usually differentiate between fantasy and reality and hence is likely to be disturbed and upset by material that an older child could view and assimilate without being harmed.

The following activities are recommended to parents anxious to help their children to develop as more critical and discriminating television viewers.

1 With their young children parents could aid the early development of sound viewing habits by asking a few simple questions at the conclusion of a television programme. For example:

* How did the programme begin?
* What happened next?
* How did it finish?
* Which character did you like best? Why?
* Which character did you like least? Why?

Questions such as these should bring forth some response from the young viewers and help to sharpen their awareness of right values.

2 With slightly older children parents might ask them to suggest alternative endings. For example, what might have happened if the police car had arrived after the bandits' helicopter had left the bank?

TELEVISION

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